

MARY SPENCER NAY

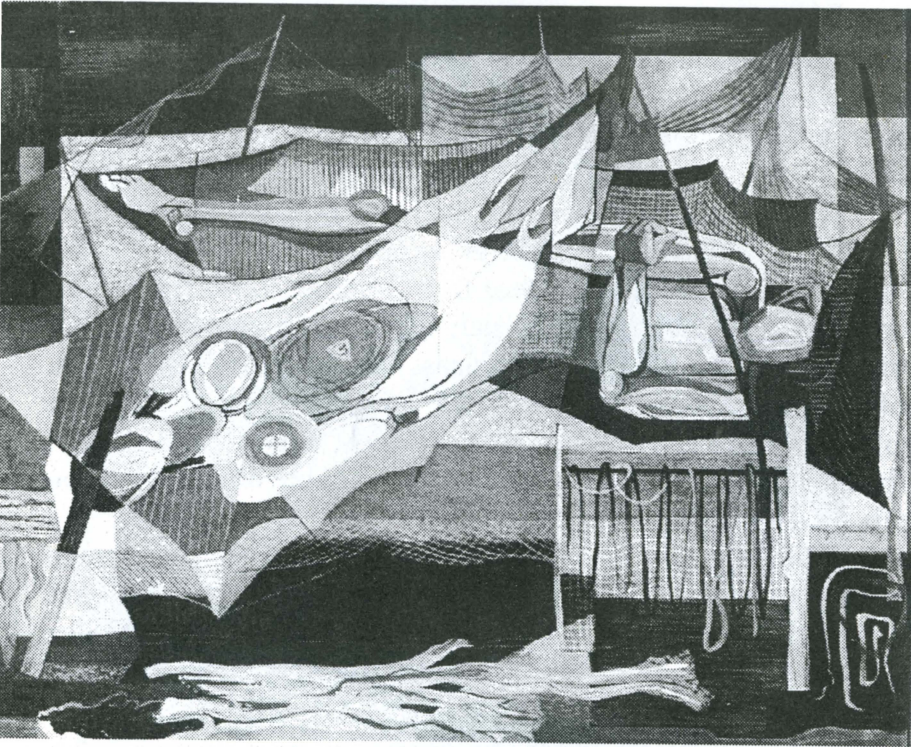
Retrospective



Curator: Paul Bowen

December 1, 1995 - January 21, 1996

Provincetown Art Association and Museum
Provincetown, Mass.



Ensnared, 1949

Distinguished Professor of Art Education at the university, and in 1975 was appointed to the Marcia S. Hite Chair of Painting at the latter school. Altogether she taught forty years, during which time she instructed thousands of students.

Nay's works can be seen as consisting of three overlapping periods: the early Louisville period (1931 - c. 1979); the artist's Mexican period (1946 - 83); and the Provincetown period (1937 - 93).

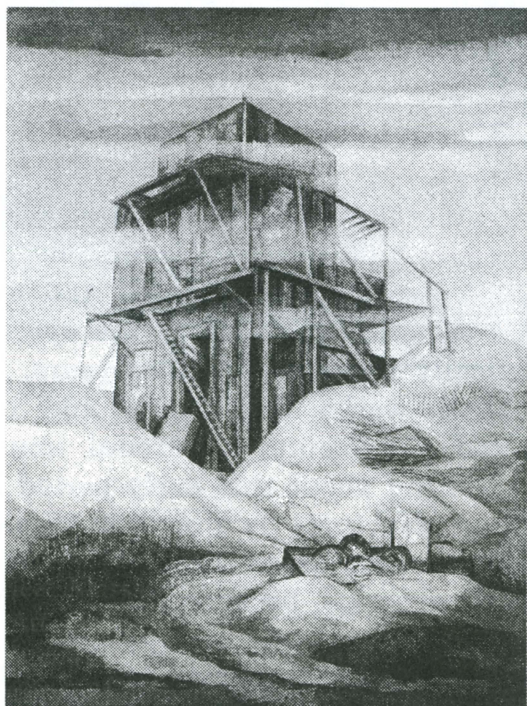
Her first period began with the delightful oil Goats in a Bathtub (1931), which resulted from a scene in a local dump. During this period her subjects were both closely related to nature and also the result of a surreal absorption with life and death. Such material echoed both the artist's fundamental feeling for the mystery in nature and her urge to probe for essences below the surfaces of things. For instance, a triptych the artist painted in 1955 was titled Life, Aspiration, Death. It represented a superb effort toward interpreting the workings of the subconscious mind. Also, during this period she painted the life cycles of the butterfly and the crab.

Paintings produced during this early period were low in key, subdued in color, and displayed her talent for manipulating darks and lights, or value. Objects depicted included rocks, roots, driftwood, fossils, bones, and various spidery motifs, some recognizable, some not. Extremely refined in proportion, understated and overlapping, the mysterious organic shapes carry the eye back into space and ecstatically upward. In later years, Nay would call her surrealistic works "melancholy" and "depressing," but they exerted a profound emotional impact upon their viewers. Writing about this early period Nay stated: "I have built up structures by a method considered intuitive. I have in most cases based these subconscious symbols on organic natural forms, because Nature is my chief source of visual stimulation."

The artist's second period began in 1946, when she traveled to Mexico for the first time. She fell in love with



Ikon, 1987



Charlie's Dune Castle

the people and the country - its architecture, its history, its ambience. She was to return many times thereafter, and produced more than twenty resplendent Mexican works related to the Mayans, the Aztecs and their ancient gods.

During her 1946 trip she studied painting at the International School of Art, and lithography at the Taller de Graphica Popular. In 1962 she returned to tour the country's impressive archaeological sites, and in 1966 spent six months of her first sabbatical in the hill town San Miguel de Allende with her husband Lou Block and two small daughters. She returned to Mexico during the Christmas holidays of '71 and '75, and made her farewell trip to the country in 1982, touring once again the pre-Colombian ruins of the Valley of Teotihuacan, Oaxaca and Yucatan.

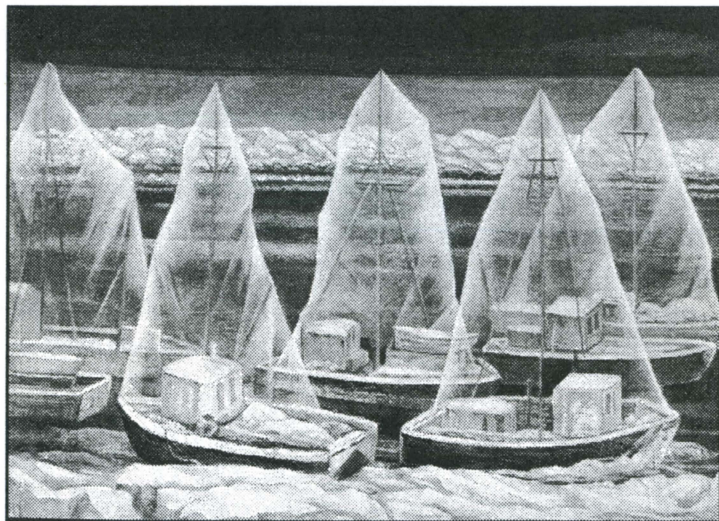
The largest of Nay's Mexican paintings is the triptych titled Mayan Mother Goddess, with the life-sustaining corn god on the left, a figure representing death on the right, and the Mother Goddess in the central panel. It is a sumptuous, impressive work. In others of this group, such as Black Gold via the Earth Goddess and Sun God, her usual restrained palette gives way to brighter color, particularly in the latter work which was painted in brilliant yellows and oranges. The organic totems of Nay's first period, with their visionary, spiritual message and suggestion of "bone-like or crystalline inner fabric" have disappeared.

On her second sabbatical Mary drove, with her daughters, from the British Isles and Portugal to Greece, making sketches, drawings and paintings along the way. Later, she travelled to Peru, Russia and China, acquiring, as a result of her extensive travels, an enviable world view.

Nay's third or Provincetown period began in the summer of 1937, when she drove her two Louisville art teachers, the Misses Barnum and Ainslie, from Louisville to Provincetown. As early as 1915 the two older artists had built a large home on top of a high dune facing Atkins-



Upper Cornisch from Pont du Loup, 1985



Iced In #2, 1988

Mayo Road. Nay returned to Provincetown many summers thereafter, and following her marriage in 1951 she and her husband habitually spent their summers on the Cape, where Mary studied with her friend Margo.

In 1979 the artist retired and moved to Provincetown permanently. She had been able to purchase the big house on Atkins-Mayo Road, and after her move to the Cape she decided to "dig into the inspiration of Cape Cod." She had always probed below the superficial surfaces of things, and now, in her retirement years, she wanted to discover the essence of Provincetown.

During the 50's and 60's she created collages using small pieces of weathered wood, sand, broken glass, rusty cans, shells, bones and other fascinating materials to be found on the beach. She finished these collages with paint, lacquer or casein, occasionally using her trademark, gold leaf. Sometimes these materials were glued to a firm ground, then framed; at other times they were fitted into three-dimensional, cell-like backgrounds.

Before moving to the Cape in '79 she had never experienced a winter in the North. Now she began to enjoy the ice and snow, and painted several views of boats half-hidden under white, rime-ridden sails, looking like wraiths or phantoms. Two of these mysterious paintings of winterized boats she titled *Iced In* and *Icy Harbor*. No painter has painted ice and frost with more imagination or dexterity, as is evident also in her work *Blackbirds on Ice*. In fact, throughout her career she excelled at painting fine, exquisite details.

In Provincetown Nay's work became warmer, more humanized, more lyrical and more relaxed. Yet the most memorable quality in her work remained. It is the thread of mystery which sings below the surfaces, connecting the viewer to the deep meanings of life. Look for this thread. Listen to its singing sound long enough and you will become one with the artist's joy in life.

Emily Farnham
Provincetown, 1995

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- May 13, 1913 Born in Crestwood, KY.
1951 Married artist-photographer Lou Block.
1954 Birth of first daughter, Malu Block.
1955 Birth of second daughter, Fayette Block Watkis.
1965 - 66 Spent six months of her first sabbatical from the University of Louisville with her family in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico.
1969 Lou Block died.
1972 - 73 During her second sabbatical drove 22,000 miles with her two daughters from the British Isles and Portugal to Greece.
1986 Traveled in Peru, flying from Lima to Cuzco to Arequipa; viewed Machu-Picchu and the Nazca Lines. Photographed Halley's Comet through a telescope.
1987 Traveled in Russia, cruising on a Russian liner from Stockholm to Leningrad en route to Moscow. Viewed St. Basil's in the Red Square.
1989 Traveled in China with a Louisville group which included Nay's sister, Dottie. Viewed the Great Wall.
May 22, 1993 Died in Provincetown, MA.

EDUCATION

- Louisville Children's Free Art Classes with Fayette Barnum, 1923
Received a scholarship and attended the Art Center Association School in Louisville, 1930 - 36
Earned a B.A. degree from the University of Louisville, 1942
Studied at the Art Students League in New York City with Kuniyoshi, George Grosz, and Will Barnet, 1942
Lithography at the Cincinnati Art Academy, 1943
Painting with Carlos Merida and Alfredo Zalce at the International School of Art in Mexico, 1946
Attended summer seminars given by Boris Margo in Provincetown during the late 1940's and early 1950's
Earned an M.A. degree from the University of Louisville, 1960

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Instructor at the Art Center Association School in Louisville, 1935-58
Taught the University of Louisville's first courses in art education, 1942
Director of the Art Center Association School in Louisville, 1944-49
Assistant Professor at the University of Louisville, 1959-64
Associate Professor at the University of Louisville, 1965-74
Distinguished Professor of Art Education, 1971
Marcia S. Hite Chair of Painting, 1975-79
Retired, 1979

ONE-MAN SHOWS

- 1955 Fine Arts Gallery, University of Kentucky, Lexington
1963 Ruth White Gallery, 42 West 57th Street, New York City
1976 J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville
1981 Swansborough Gallery, Wellfleet, Massachusetts
1982 Owensboro Museum of Fine Art, Owensboro, Kentucky
1983 Louisville Art Association, Water Tower Gallery, Louisville
1994 Dario A. Covi Gallery, University of Louisville (Posthumously)

SIGNIFICANT NATIONAL GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1938 Third Annual National Exhibition of American Art, Fine Arts Society, New York City
- 1939 World's Fair, New York City, Gallery of American Art Today
- 1940 Exhibition of Contemporary American Art, Metropolitan Museum, New York City
- 1950 First International Exhibition of Contemporary Color Lithography, Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio
- 1951 Sixtieth Annual Exhibition of American Painting, Chicago Art Institute
- 1956 Tenth Annual Print Show, Brooklyn Museum, New York City
- 1959 Second "Rowland Traveling Exhibition of Cape Cod Artists"
- 1963 Contemporary American Watercolor Show, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- 1973 National "Small Paintings Show," Frame House Gallery, Louisville
- 1986 - 93 Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown



COLLECTIONS

- J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville
University of Louisville
Evansville Museum of Arts and Science, Indiana
Kentucky State Fair Board
Ohio University, Athens, Ohio
"Kentucky Artists," Georgetown College, Kentucky
Ashland Oil Company, Ashland, Kentucky
Phelps Dodge Company, Elizabethtown, Kentucky
Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown
Provincetown Heritage Museum, Provincetown
Numerous private collections
Extensive awards and regional honors